

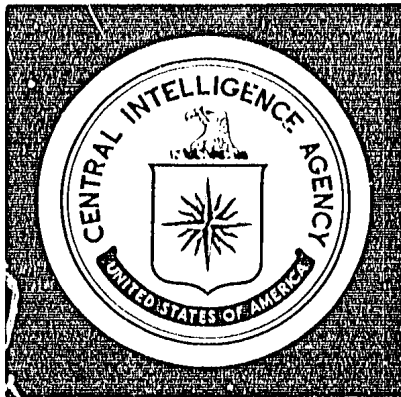
25X1

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP85T00875R001100090061-0

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP85T00875R001100090061-0

SECRET

25X1



DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*South Vietnamese Political Stability:
Prospects in the Wake of President Thieu's Re-election*

SECRET

21 December 1971
No. 2107/71

WARNING

This document contains information affecting the national defense of the United States, within the meaning of Title 18, sections 793 and 794, of the US Code, as amended. Its transmission or revelation of its contents to or receipt by an unauthorized person is prohibited by law.

GROUP 1
EXCLUDED FROM AUTOMATIC
DOWNGRADING AND
DECLASSIFICATION

SECRET

25X1

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
21 December 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

South Vietnamese Political Stability:
Prospects in the Wake of President Thieu's Re-election

The coming year in South Vietnam should bring some clear indications of the Saigon government's long-range staying power against the Communist opposition. With the US ground combat role largely closed out and US military, political, and economic assistance curtailed, South Vietnam will at that time be largely on its own. The Communist military and political apparatus, though substantially weakened, will pose a very real military and political threat, and the Communists retain enough assets to rebuild their position should Saigon display any substantial weaknesses.

A critical factor in Saigon's long-term prospects will be the degree of political stability and control the government is able to maintain. If the stability that has prevailed during the last couple of years is preserved, the regime's long-range prospects will be good. If stability deteriorates, the Vietnamization program and the whole effort to resist a Communist take-over could quickly falter. This memorandum examines the prospects for political stability during the next year or so, starting with the recent presidential election in South Vietnam.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.

SECRET

25X1



Thieu Is Still in Front

SECRET

25X1

Significance of the Presidential Election

1. President Thieu's manipulation of the recent election drew heavy criticism, and some Vietnamese believed he might lose his grip on the reins of power or that the Communists might gain significant benefits from the controversy. Political tension and the atmosphere of uncertainty dissipated quickly after the election and, now that the dust has settled, the Thieu government appears to have emerged in a strong position with a reasonably good chance for further improvement.
2. Some observers--particularly among South Vietnam's urban elite--thought the presidential election on 3 October would be a genuine contest in which Thieu would put his hold on power up for grabs. They anticipated that the central issues would be aired and that the population would have a measure of choice between types of leadership and directions of policy. As the government's political opposition defined the issues last winter, the people had a choice between more war with President Thieu or the possibility of peace with Big Minh or Vice President Ky.
3. The opposition's effort to establish a distinction between its policy and Thieu's was, however, largely rhetoric. Although the government might have moved somewhat to the left had General Minh been elected, his terms for ending the war probably would not have differed drastically from Thieu's. Ky has always been a hawk on the war, and his pronouncements about an immediate peace were largely an election pose. Thieu managed to undercut the peace platform of the opposition by playing to widely prevalent peace sentiment himself, claiming that his administration would bring peace sooner through a military victory over the Communists.
4. The peace talk thus had a hollow ring, but the fact that the candidates felt compelled to speak of it shows how war-weary the South Vietnamese are. This weariness has been a constraint on the war effort of both the government and the Communists. If the war should begin to go badly for the government

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

as US withdrawals near completion, apathy could work against Thieu and threaten the country's political stability.

5. While the talk in the election campaigning was of peace, the gut issue was the question of who would hold and dispense the power that has accrued over the years to the government in Saigon. Thieu, unwilling to settle for a mere plurality, regarded the candidacies of Minh and Ky as an intolerable threat. The President moved aggressively to block Ky's candidacy. Minh, who became discouraged by Thieu's tough tactics and by what he regarded as continued strong US backing for the President, withdrew from the race. Instead of a voting choice, the election became a demonstration of Thieu's power, with the President using his authority in the army and the vast government apparatus to orchestrate the greatest "landslide" vote since the days of Diem.

6. The significance of the vote in terms of the country's future stability lies not in the artificiality of the contest, but in the government's impressive demonstration of control in mustering the tally. As a result of the election, the Vietnamese people, including the Communists and the non-Communist opposition, were generally persuaded that the government is a force to be reckoned with seriously. Most of the non-Communist opposition appear to have decided that passive acceptance of the government, not active opposition, is the best course of action for the time being.

7. It is still true, of course, that Thieu's more militant opponents, especially in the cities, bitterly resent what they regard as his abuse of power. They are convinced that the government's image of legitimacy has been badly damaged and that this will make the regime more vulnerable in the long run to both internal and external pressures. However, the great majority of the population, in urban as well as rural areas, simply did not get involved in the election controversy. In short, while

-3-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1



Neither the Students nor the Veterans
Could Stop Thieu's Juggernaut



25X1

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

many people do not support Thieu in a positive sense, most of them seem resigned to his continuation in power, at least for the near term.

The Opposition Threat to Stability

8. Most of the urban agitation against Thieu during the election came from a few thousand students and disabled veterans. Some of Thieu's former supporters turned against him, including members of the Senate, pro-government newspaper editors, members of his cabinet, and Catholic intellectuals. Grumbling and signs of less-than-wholehearted support were reported from a few high-ranking army officers.

9. Surprisingly, the protests quickly subsided after the election, and militant opposition elements are disorganized and fragmented. Overt opposition by moderates has largely disappeared, partly because of intimidation induced by Thieu's show of power and partly because some of these critics were afraid that they would be left out in the cold when the jobs and other rewards were passed out by the regime.

10. Neither Ky nor Big Minh, probably the only non-Communists in South Vietnam with sufficient personal standing to compete seriously with Thieu, has displayed much staying power since the election. Ky was never seriously considered as an alternative by most Vietnamese. His shoot-from-the-hip style and baiting of Thieu amused and pleased many, but his attacks on corruption had a hollow ring because of his somewhat questionable record and because his intemperate remarks raised questions about his maturity. Another factor in Ky's failure--and one which will continue to limit his political effectiveness--is his almost total lack of appeal to the powerful An Quang Buddhists, who bitterly resent the harsh measures he used to put down the Buddhist "struggle" movement in 1966.

11. Ky has been sulking in his villa at Tan Son Nhut Airport since the inauguration. He is still an air force officer, although on inactive

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

status, and Thieu may find some minor position for him. Ky's prestige and disruptive potential are such, however, that the President may feel that the best long-term solution is to get Ky out of South Vietnam. In the meantime, Ky will be under sufficient surveillance to keep his opposition within manageable bounds.

12. Big Minh quickly dropped from the public eye after withdrawing from the race. He claims to be discouraged by the strong support he believes the US has given Thieu. Minh's inactivity is also explained by his desire to avoid falling into the trap of leading a badly divided opposition. During the campaign, Minh's vague talk which side-stepped policy stands cost him supporters. Probably more important than his failure to develop a stand on the issues was the fact that he simply was not the aggressive political infighter required to maintain pressure on Thieu. Considering himself "above politics," Minh never attempted to build a competitive political organization throughout the nation. Although he still hopes that he will eventually be asked to step in and save the country, it would take a strong draft movement before he would become active again in politics. On his own he is not much of a threat to Thieu.

13. It is difficult to foresee the emergence of anyone else who could offer a significant challenge to Thieu. Truong Dinh Dzu, who polled a surprisingly large "peace" vote against Thieu in 1967, is still in jail. Dzu will be released in May 1972, if not sooner, and there will doubtless be considerable speculation that he will seek to organize active opposition against the government. He will, of course, be watched closely by Thieu's men, and it is unlikely that they would permit Dzu to develop a significant threat without moving against him. Thieu has repeatedly demonstrated that he is capable of replacing any military leader who seems to be getting too strong and ambitious.

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1



Thich Tri Quang: Trying Legal Politics for a Change

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

The An Quang Position

14. Of the organized non-Communist groups active politically in Vietnam, the Buddhists have the broadest base of support and the greatest potential for upsetting stability. They showed little appetite for confrontations with the Thieu government during the recent election, and their failure in most areas of the country to offer their blessing or support to the opposition proved a major advantage for Thieu.

15. In the past the Buddhists have repeatedly demonstrated their political strength. They were instrumental in the fall of Diem in 1963, and the Buddhist-led "struggle" movement against the Ky government in 1966 caused serious disorders in central Vietnam. In the early and mid-1960s, the Buddhists bitterly opposed the Catholic and military-oriented regimes in Saigon, regarding them as intolerably oppressive and discriminatory. Many Buddhists resent the Thieu government because they feel it is corrupt, dictatorial, and insufficiently responsive to Buddhist aspirations. While a relatively small fraction--about 20 percent--of the South Vietnamese population are formally affiliated with the Buddhist church, another 60 percent are nominal followers. The church thus exerts some influence over a majority of the population. Monks and lay leaders from the activist An Quang Buddhist movement have particularly close ties with the population, especially in central Vietnam.

16. Significantly, the central Buddhist hierarchy in Saigon, led by the An Quang, has moderated its political approach in recent years, shifting from confrontation to legal electoral politics. In the Buddhists' first real venture into conventional politics in the 1970 Senate elections (they officially boycotted the 1967 elections), the An Quang-backed list of candidates made a strong showing, finishing first among 17 slates and receiving about one fourth of the total vote. An Quang candidates again did well in the Lower House elections this fall, sweeping nearly all of the seats in central Vietnam. As a result, about 16 percent

-6-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

of the Senate and about 17 percent of the Lower House is made up of An Quang - backed representatives. The Buddhists have also captured some important committee chairmanships, including the Senate committee on foreign affairs. Thus, they have attained a limited but real voice in the legislative side of the national government.

17. An Quang still opposes Thieu on basic issues, such as the government's hard line on the war. Fundamentally, An Quang favors a neutralist solution in Vietnam in which the balance of power would be held by the Buddhists. But there is no sign that they will use their strength in the National Assembly to interfere significantly with the war effort. Ever since the 1968 Tet Offensive, during which hundreds of Buddhists were massacred in Hue, the An Quang has mixed its desire for peace with a tough-minded appreciation of the need to prevent the Communists from obtaining firm control over the populated sectors of South Vietnam.

18. In explaining the An Quang attitude toward the recent presidential election, Thich Tri Quang, the group's most influential leader, noted that the Buddhist faithful are much less disposed than several years ago to take to the streets in support of calls from the monks. Tri Quang, once one of the most militant Buddhist leaders, is regarded as the chief architect of the Buddhist shift to legal political tactics. He feels that it would be unwise for the Buddhists to take rash actions that might jeopardize the substantial gains they have made in the Senate and Lower House. He believes that they cannot force Thieu out of office and that for the present they should try to improve their position by working within the existing system. The present de facto accommodation between Thieu and the An Quang stems both from this moderate An Quang line and from the government's greater tolerance of Buddhist political activity. If the accommodation persists for long, it will be a significant stabilizing factor.

-7-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

19. But not all Buddhists are inclined to be conciliatory. Many--especially in central Vietnam--still do not trust the Thieu government. Younger, more militant An Quang monks there and in the capital hope to build up a well-organized opposition movement, believing that the government eventually must be replaced by one dedicated to a neutralist solution to the war. The older monks retain control of most Buddhist political activity, however, and, consequently, there would seem to be a good chance that the present accommodation can be sustained during the coming year.

The National Assembly

20. During Thieu's first term, the National Assembly was never a very powerful factor in the South Vietnamese political equation. The Lower House won an especially bad reputation. Some members were involved in gross corruption, many more frequently accepted bribes in return for their votes, and only a minority maintained much of a relationship with their constituencies. The poor caliber of the Assembly was partly due to the fact that voters knew little or nothing about most of the candidates when the first Lower House election was held in 1967. The Senate has enjoyed somewhat more prestige but has seldom had a major impact on national policy. The Thieu government early was able to control enough votes in the Lower House to offset the actions of the more independent Senate. Although much vital legislation encountered long delays and some was not passed at all, the government managed to block hostile legislation or amendments proposed by the Senate through its control in the Lower House.

21. Beginning in the summer of 1970 the opposition in the Assembly has been strengthened and the body's reputation has been enhanced. Half the Senate was re-elected in 1970 and a new Lower House last August. Assemblymen supported by the An Quang Buddhists form the core of the opposition in both houses, but other independent organizations, such as the Progressive Nationalist Party,

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1



The "Khaki Party" at the Polls:
Strongest Non-Communist Political Force in the Country

SECRET

25X1

25X1

have managed to increase their representation as their bases of popular support have grown.

22. Independent political elements in the Assembly now have the potential to cause Thieu considerable embarrassment. Just before the presidential election, for example, the Senate passed a resolution backed by the An Quang condemning as "disastrous" the President's plan to proceed with an uncontested election. It is evident that Thieu will soon have to spend more time and energy on convincing the Assembly that it should support his new economic reform package and the new budget. In the past economic matters like this have been a frequent source of friction between the two.

23. Thieu recognizes the potential trouble his policies face in the Assembly. His agents are busy organizing government supporters in the Assembly so as to maximize his influence. But the opposition also is better organized than in the past. So, passage of legislation favored by the government is likely to be about as difficult as it was before. If this is so, the regime should be able to push through the most vital bills. The attention focused on the Assembly could enhance its stature among the populace, at least as a forum for expressing dissent. If the opposition--and especially the An Quang--were to succeed in advancing some of its own interests, the Assembly would gain respect from the South Vietnam people. Constitutionalism, in short, would be strengthened.

The Political Role of the Army

24. Thieu's most important internal prop has been the South Vietnamese Army. Without army backing, any regime in South Vietnam would soon be ousted. Long the strongest non-Communist political force in the country, the army has helped more than any other Vietnamese institution to hold the country together politically as well as militarily during times of great Communist pressure. Many military officers serving as province and

25X1

SECRET

25X1

district chiefs have been criticized for their corruption and authoritarian methods, but only they have the organization, training, and discipline necessary to manage the country and advance the war effort.

25. The army's support of Thieu does not stem from any great personal loyalty to him, but rather from his control over the key command positions. There are a number of reasons why Thieu has been able to establish tight control. He is an army man himself, and his militant anti-Communism is shared by most of the top army leadership. Thieu has been adroit in politicking within the army throughout his career and has often emerged as the natural compromise choice for leadership positions. Basically cautious, he has seldom pressed confrontations; he has been persistent and has demonstrated competence in all his assignments. Perhaps most significantly, Thieu shuffled the top military leadership extensively in his first term, and most of the present commanders and province chiefs owe their positions--and in many cases their promotions--to him. Thieu was originally a Buddhist but converted to Catholicism during the Diem years to safeguard his career. And he does not have a strong regional identity since he comes from isolated and unimportant Binh Thuan Province on the coast northeast of Saigon. These latter factors tend to increase his acceptability among Vietnamese in general, both military and civilian.

26. Despite the extensive military support for Thieu, the allegiance of some leading generals appeared to waver, at least momentarily, before the election, as criticism of Thieu's policy from inside South Vietnam and abroad became more intense.

Rumors claimed that secret polls taken in the military establishment showed surprisingly strong sentiment in favor of Ky and Minh, especially in central Vietnam and among younger officers below the rank of colonel.

SECRET

27. The army intrigues never got beyond the discussion stage, partly because no one other than Thieu had a firm base of support in the military establishment and partly because it was clear to all that any attempt to unseat Thieu by extra-constitutional means would meet with strong US disapproval. There is little reason to believe, therefore, that the army--over the short term at least--is anything but a factor supporting the stability of the Thieu regime. The President's control remains tight. He has demonstrated that he can change corps commanders--the most important military leaders in the country--when he chooses.

28. Only two contingencies could threaten his standing with the military: a drastic deterioration in the government's military position or a substantial policy breach between the US and Thieu. In either situation the army might decide to move against Thieu. In the meantime, Thieu will probably continue to be regarded by the military as the best available leader to prosecute the war against the Communists.

The Economy

29. The government's ability to keep the economy from seriously deteriorating during the coming year will have an important, and possibly decisive, bearing on regime stability. The economy began to revive from its wartime low in 1968, when the effects of the US buildup began to take effect in a significant way and when Communist strength had passed its high point. From mid-1968 thru 1971, security in the countryside steadily improved, especially in III and IV Corps, and rural economic recovery and development accelerated markedly. The nation's small industrial sector also made rapid gains. Although inflation continued to undercut incomes of many people, especially in urban areas, the government began to make significant strides in slowing inflation during 1970 and 1971. The rate was held to less

SECRET

25X1

7

than 15 percent in 1971, and price stability was greater than at any time since 1963. The sharply accelerated US withdrawal has caused surprisingly little disruption of the economy thus far.

30. Thieu needs to preserve security in the countryside so that the rural economy will not be jeopardized. He also needs to effect improvements in the urban economy. Success in these endeavors will keep the over-all economic situation from working against him. The economic reforms launched by the government in November were designed to achieve both objectives.

31. The infusion of American money has thus far made up the deficits and supplied the momentum that has kept the South Vietnamese economy within manageable bounds. Thieu recognizes that this dependence cannot continue indefinitely. He hopes that the new measures will help take up some of the slack and that the economy can at least be prevented from becoming a major popular grievance. Over the next 12 months, assuming something like the present level of US aid, the economy is not likely to be a significant threat to political stability. Some of the needed groundwork may, in fact, be laid for eventually putting the economy on a self-sustaining basis. Beyond 1972, if US assistance is cut back sharply, South Vietnam would face a massive economic contraction that could have a considerable negative impact on political stability.

Thieu's "Rural Strategy"

32. In recent years, it has become clear to the US, to the South Vietnamese Army leadership, and to Thieu personally that the Vietnamese Communists, with their Maoist strategy of "people's warfare," were drawing their greatest strength from the rural areas in the south. The Tet Offensive of 1968 drove home the point that the Communists were using the countryside as a staging base to attack the major cities. The government had to win support in the countryside if it were to survive.

-12-

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

25X1



Stumping the Countryside

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

33. After Tet, Thieu moved on several fronts to strengthen his government's position in the countryside. To broaden its organized political base, he tried to weld the traditional non-Communist political parties into a united front. His success was limited. It soon became apparent that the country's political parties--essentially narrow, elitist factions--were mainly interested in getting their own cadre into positions of power. All were urban-based or had followings in only a few provinces; none had the broad backing in the countryside the regime really needed in its fight against the Communists.

34. Thieu soon turned away from the parties to concentrate on broadening his personal political base. While working hard to consolidate his personal standing with the military, he has made a sustained effort to attract support from officials in the elected village administrations and provincial councils throughout the country, as well as in the National Assembly.

35. Thieu has encouraged the development of popularly elected local political councils despite the misgivings of appointed district and province chiefs and local generals who fear that their positions may be jeopardized. Thieu, keenly aware that he must have the support of the army and the government apparatus, has moved with caution.

36. Recently, Thieu seems to have been using a dual approach in his attempt to build a better political base. He is again trying to develop a government party--the Democracy Party--and plans to absorb some of the existing political organizations in it. He intends to be more selective this time, recruiting mainly from groups such as the Progressive Nationalist Movement and the Farmer Worker Party, which have demonstrated some strength, vigor, and vote-getting abilities. The strength of the Progressive Nationalist Movement is concentrated in the provinces near Saigon and in the delta. In these areas, the movement enjoys some popular standing and has a fairly effective hold on the provincial machinery. Thieu also plans to try to attract to his party respected and able individuals who in

-13-

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

25X1



Thieu Visits Montagnard Tribesmen

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

the past have belonged to narrowly based urban elitist groups. In addition, he intends to invite many appointed officials in the government's provincial hierarchy to join the party, thus putting a kind of party stamp on the existing bureaucracy.

37. Whether this strategy will be any more successful than Thieu's party-building attempts in the past remains to be seen. To have any significant popular appeal, Thieu must convince the people that the new party represents a vehicle through which the government will try to improve their living standards and to advance their interests. This will take effective programs and positive government action. Thieu's proposed party is unlikely to have a significant impact one way or another on the country's stability during the next year or so, but over the longer term it holds some promise of recruiting support for the government.

38. Thieu has also tried to enhance his image as a leader throughout the country. As security has improved during the past two years, he has made frequent visits to the provinces--ribbon cutting ceremonies at new bridges, schools, and canals; speeches at agricultural fairs, land reform ceremonies, and at various functions held by religious and ethnic groups. As a result, the President is now better known in the countryside than any other South Vietnamese leader since Diem. Government expansion of the radio and TV networks has helped immensely. In most of the southern provinces Thieu seems, in fact, to be well regarded among the rural residents. In the northern part of the country, however, the central government and Thieu personally have made little headway in popularity polls.

39. Part of the reason for Thieu's success in the south has been the government's progress toward improving economic conditions in the countryside. The rural population now has a genuine stake in perpetuating the present regime. One of the most important programs is land reform. The South Vietnamese have always been a nation of rice farmers, and they have a compelling desire to own their land. The Communist exploitation of this desire in earlier stages of the war was a significant factor in the successes they

-14-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

attained in Vietnam. In a little more than a year Saigon's new land reform program has distributed land titles to more than 200,000 former tenant farmers--over a third of the ultimate goal. The aim is the virtual elimination of tenancy on the country's rice lands. Although the program has a considerable distance to go, and is far behind schedule in compensating former landlords, the Thieu government has made an impressive beginning toward usurping the land reform issue from the Communists. The program has been especially effective in the delta, where the majority of the redistributed land is located. It does not seem to have had much impact in the northern provinces.

New Nationalism?

40. Massive US intervention has prevented a Communist take-over of South Vietnam, but the US presence has had a negative side. The omnipresence of a powerful ally has tended to sap local initiative and has led some Vietnamese, suspicious as always of foreign domination, to support the Communist "war of liberation." The ability of the Vietnamese Communists to harness radical anti-foreign nationalism and to pose as the "true patriots" of Vietnam has been one of their greatest strengths.

41. The draw-down of US forces has given Saigon an opportunity to present a more credible nationalistic case to the people and, to some extent, this has already strengthened the regime's claim to represent Vietnamese and not foreign interests. The Thieu government's prospects for assuming a nationalist mantle more fully in the future may also benefit from the Communists' loss of patriotic appeal. The enormous damage and loss of life caused by Communist attacks in South Vietnam, especially in the 1968 offensives, brought home the seriousness of the Communist threat to many people who previously had not been convinced of the danger. There still is a large residue of sentiment in many parts of the country that is at least neutral, if not favorable toward the Viet Cong, but the duration and bloodiness of the conflict seem finally to have eroded the stature of the Communists as the only righteous bearers of the standard of Vietnamese nationalism.

-15-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

42. So far Thieu has been unable to speak out in completely convincing nationalistic terms. Because the regime still is so dependent on American assistance, it is difficult for Thieu to refute charges from some of his critics that he is a creature of the US. Moreover, he speaks only for the South, and many Vietnamese have a strong feeling that they are one people, North and South, and that any true nationalism involves reunification of the country. They find it difficult to support a war that aims to perpetuate the North-South division.

43. Some of the nationalistic sentiments expressed by Thieu's critics--students, Buddhist groups, and various anti-government politicians--have taken on strong overtones of anti-Americanism. It is no accident that President Thieu's two leading opponents in the election tried to exploit nationalist sentiment by appealing often to anti-American feeling.

44. Although in the future, Thieu will be in a better position to exploit nationalist sentiment, he will have to tread carefully because of the dangers of demands for reunification and the arousal of anti-US feelings that would complicate his relationship with Washington. Over the long term, a growing sense of nationalism could contribute to stability in South Vietnam, but in the next year or so, it is unlikely to tip the balance significantly one way or the other.

Whither South Vietnam?

45. Over the next year or so the prospects for continued relative stability in South Vietnam seem good, provided that substantial US aid continues and the Communists do not pull out all the stops in another general offensive. Thieu has prevailed over his non-Communist opposition. After having tried and failed to unseat him, it is fragmented and disorganized. Thieu himself seems confident the mandate he received from the October election is greater than the one he received four years ago, when he was the army's chosen candidate and his

-16-

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

constituency lay almost exclusively among the military. Dealing from a position of relative strength and owing few political debts, he will probably be in a better position to lead.

46. The relative ease with which Thieu rode out the criticism over his uncontested re-election should not obscure the fact that stability in South Vietnam rests on uncertain foundations. Much depends on South Vietnamese motivation, and this has long been one of the most difficult things in the war to measure with any precision. Although South Vietnam's will seems to have grown stronger in recent years, there is still compelling evidence of weakness on this score, including the poor fighting spirit of certain military units, the debilitating corruption that afflicts too many government officials, and the "wait-and-see" attitude of part of the population.

47. One widely accepted theory holds that the shortcomings in Saigon's will to persist are caused by inherent deficiencies in the South Vietnamese character, particularly excessive individualism and an inability to cooperate in any common cause. This view fails to explain, however, how the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong--many of whom were also South Vietnamese--succeeded in winning strong support from millions during the French Indochina War and in the early stages of the current war. The history of those years demonstrates that the South Vietnamese are capable of strong political commitment and fighting spirit. The Vietnamese Communists mobilized people with the help of ruthless terror tactics, of course, but in a more fundamental sense they succeeded because they fashioned a comprehensive political, economic, and social program that was responsive to deeply felt Vietnamese aspirations.

48. After World War II had destroyed the colonial system in Indochina, the Vietnamese were off balance, without the stability provided either by tradition or the wide acceptance of a new order. The Communists stepped into this political vacuum with a program that appealed to a broad base of Vietnamese society: peasants were given access to political power if they accepted the revolution; the

25X1

SECRET

25X1

people were promised a personal economic stake in the system through land reform; and, perhaps most importantly, the Communists identified themselves with nationalist sentiment with all of its anti-foreign aspects. This was the program the Vietnamese Communists called a "national democratic revolution." It enabled them to mobilize the Vietnamese population for a long war of resistance.

49. The appeal of the Communists' revolutionary political program has on occasion proved to be a more significant influence on the course of the fighting than the military forces in Vietnam. This occurred in the years immediately following World War II and again in the early 1960s when the Communists rapidly built up their strength in the face of great military disadvantages. One of the central premises of Communist doctrine today is that the Communists will be able to repeat this process in the early 1970s when they again undertake to exploit political strength to overcome military weakness.

50. But much has happened in the South in the last several years to make this strategy more difficult to carry forward. After many false starts and detours, the non-Communist South Vietnamese have been striving to fashion national programs that accomplish the same things the Communists once did so successfully. Thieu's attempt to woo the peasants with a rural-oriented political strategy is an attempt to broaden the base of his regime so as to undermine what has been a major Communist strength--the backing of the peasantry. The government's land reform program and other rural development schemes aim to give people an economic stake in the system and thereby remove what used to be a major incentive for joining the Viet Cong. And Saigon in its recent attempts to articulate a new sense of nationalist self-sufficiency seeks to undercut another major Communist propaganda theme.

51. The government still faces many problems. Thieu has relied heavily on US military, economic, and moral support, and the US is rapidly disengaging. He is dependent on the South Vietnamese Army, which is getting stronger but still faces its most difficult tests. Thieu has also counted on at least the

SECRET

25X1

SECRET

25X1

tacit support of the rural population to isolate the Communists, but failure to follow through with his rural strategy in the face of rising Communist pressure in the countryside would reduce peasant support. The rural population remains vulnerable to force, and, if the Communists should add considerably to their war effort in the coming year and effectively challenge the predominant position of the government in the countryside, the peasants would probably begin to favor them again.

52. In the cities, where the election has left a residue of bitterness and alienation, Thieu's heavy-handed control may well encourage his opponents to employ extra-legal tactics against him. All of these problems, plus the country's economic difficulties and the public's uncertainty about the implications of US relations with Peking and Moscow, could combine to bring great pressure on the Thieu government during the coming year.

53. In the coming weeks and months, much depends on whether Thieu tries to reach some sort of accommodation with his opponents or undertakes political maneuvers that will further antagonize them. There are many ways Thieu could relieve the grievances of some of his militant critics. He could move against corruption by ousting some of the high officials involved. He could take a more even-handed approach toward the opposition in the National Assembly. The relatively few civilian politicians who have demonstrated genuine vote-getting ability--such as those associated with Progressive Nationalist Movement and the Farmer-Worker Party--could be offered responsible positions in the government. The An Quang Buddhists, in particular, pose a strong potential threat to Thieu, and he could make conciliatory gestures toward them. There have been reports that Thieu will seek accommodations with his political foes, but whether he is genuinely interested in pursuing such a course is not clear. Indeed, if the lack of trust between Thieu and the civilian population deepens, the President could be moved to take increasingly harsh repressive measures against them that would narrow his political base of support.

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

54. If the Communists mount major offensive actions during the current dry season, a series of major South Vietnamese military reverses could give considerable impetus to anti-war and anti-government feeling throughout the country. It seems likely, however, that the South Vietnamese have developed sufficient military strength to give them a reasonable chance--with US air support--of weathering a Communist offensive this dry season.

55. In the long run, while South Vietnam's prospects depend on how much support it receives from the US and how hard the Vietnamese Communists press the struggle, the country cannot survive unless the South Vietnamese themselves develop a strong will to resist. And the government's various reform programs could play a critical role in building motivation. Historically, a political program responsive to the needs of the great bulk of the rural population has been a prerequisite to success on the battlefield in Vietnam. If the South Vietnamese fail to follow through with the reforms which have been started in the South, history may well judge that they were overwhelmed, not because they were abandoned by their allies or because they had formidable foes, but because they were their own worst enemies.

25X1

SECRET